

Even a Loathsome Person May Become Spellbound as He Faces a Masterpiece of Human Nature.

# THE BLUE RIBBON

BY GERALD BEAUMONT.

If you ever go to Mexicana you will probably meet Mimi. Double-chin. She is to be found either behind the cash register in the Mexicana cafe or back of her desk at the inn which is next door.

Time was when little Dolores sang canzones de amor at the Purple Pigeon, and Mike Morwech sat in a corner of the Palace spinning the web of the Devil's Spider, and Johnny Powell ran the dice game at Brayfield's.

New little Dolores is gone, so are the Spider and Johnny Powell.

"Dice have their laws," says St. Ambrose, "which the courts of justice cannot undo." Johnny knew these laws—and it was his business to see that no one broke them—at least not at his table. According to his own lights, Johnny was on the "up and up." Never in all his life had he cheated a man or wronged a woman, and from his own viewpoint he was not a gambler. Those who stood in front of his layout did the gambling. Johnny merely reaped the mathematical percentage of the ivory god; in return for this he ran the game, performing mental miracles as he paid off—and preserving law and order with a smile and an automatic. Some day, if he lived, Johnny would go down to the west coast, hang a hammock under a mango tree on his own ranchita, and never touch dice again. The blue eyes that looked out of Johnny's pale face were very tired, though he had seen but twenty-four summers.

Sometimes, when the take-in had been particularly large, Johnny dined at the Purple Pigeon. Here the entertainment was first class. For example, there was Billy Nichols, who would make the saxophone laugh or weep in nine languages; La Belle Helene, the whirlwind dancer who was Billy's wife; and there was, also, Senorita Dolores Romero, "The Border Nightingale," who was a rare little moth, indeed.

When the lights were lowered a trifle and Dolores sang "The Dove's Lullaby," Johnny Powell used to take two lumps of sugar, mark them with his pencil, and roll them on the tablecloth. But they had not yet come up the right way, and so he held his peace until they should. Meanwhile some one else would lean over the railing, listening to Dolores, and pursing his thick lips thoughtfully.

It is impossible to describe Mike Morwech. Morwech owned the Palace, a fact which every one understood; but he was also the chief proprietor of the Purple Pigeon, and this was something that Johnny Powell didn't know and little Dolores had found out to her sorrow.

"BUENO!" Up from his cell behind the west coast came Don Tostado to earn the sobriquet of "Senor Sap" because of the ease with which he was plucked.

The senor was short and fat and fifty. His conquests of the heart at Mexicana were far too easy. He returned for a moment who would inspire all his talents. Thus it was that he first heard of, and then beheld, the Border Nightingale singing in the Purple Pigeon. One pudgy hand went to his bosom, and his eyes rolled.

"Ah, Dios," he cried. "At last have I found the one dream of my life. Either, little one—you shall at the same table sit with Don Tostado, and we will talk—no? Come!"

When one is an entertainer certain things are innumerable. Doubtful Senorita Romero smiled upon her host, and fed the little man's vanity, striving all the while to play the game as squarely and skillfully as though she were Johnny Powell behind his layout at Brayfield's. She sought only a legitimate revenge. But alas, this was a more difficult game.

"Look up, little one," said the senor. "Did I say that I have own three thousand acres of oil, and am the amigo of the Jefe Politico? Bueno! In one, two, three I leave, and I take you with me, and you shall be my friend, the chief of police, and Mexicana—she close up! But I will not say the word. Instead I give you a ribbon for my hair, and with his own fingers does he tie the bow. How he loves me, and how very jealous he is! You are kind, senor; but truly—he may even now be watching, and he is most quick with the pistola. You must excuse me."

But Don Tostado's little black eyes grew red. The silverware clattered under the bang of a fist.

"Am I a peasant?" he roared. "Not ten thousand pesos I lose in Brayfield; twenty thousand more I have spent with Senor Morwech. Now ward to my friend, the chief of police, and Mexicana—she close up! But I will not say the word. Instead I give you a ribbon for my hair, and with his own fingers does he tie the bow. How he loves me, and how very jealous he is! You are kind, senor; but truly—he may even now be watching, and he is most quick with the pistola. You must excuse me."

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I'll show you how to make some real dough."

The Border Nightingale toyed with her fan.

"Mexicana—it is a ver' bad place," she mused. "It should close, senor. Rather than do what is in your mind, little Dolores—she kills herself."

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MORWECH got up, nodded carelessly, and went out to see what new moths had fallen into his net at the Palace. Senorita Romero sank back into her chair, eyes on her untouched glass of wine.

At that moment the ivory god rewarded the patience of Johnny Powell, sitting alone in one corner of the room, and rolling little sugar lumps across the table. The little singer turned her head and regarded the young American wistfully. He grinned and pointed to the vacant chair opposite him. In a moment she had fluttered, wide-eyed, to his table.

"Amigo mio, was it an angel of God who bade you not to leave me alone?"

"An angel?" said Johnny. "In Mexicana? Sister, there's only one angel here, and I can't figure out why she's hangin' around. I get my tips from the dice."

"Dice?" Her quick eyes beheld the sugar lumps. Before he could guard them, one small hand took quick possession. On the upturned face of each cube was a penciled heart. Johnny Powell grew very red.

"Just kiddin' myself," he explained. "Wanted to talk to you, but didn't know whether you cared for home talent. I run the game at Brayfield's. Been shooting sugar lumps six nights now, and this is the first time I threw the double house sign."

Senorita Romero veiled her eyes under long lashes, and spoke with difficulty because of the beating of her heart.

"Thou art Senor Johnny Powell," she pronounced, "—who have never wronged a woman, and who have never taken a penny of a woman's money. The poor little ones at the Palace—those who wear the red ribbons—they get the money from you to go home when no one else will give. You see, I know much."

"You sure do," admitted Johnny. "I'm a bad muchacho, but I guess I ain't what you would call rotten. Who's been talking to you?"

"Madam Double-chin. I live at her house."

The face of young Brayfield's gamekeeper hardened.

"What?"

"Nay, but thou must not look at me like that. Ah, please. To me she has been a mother, and have given me the best of her heart. With her own hand she has nursed me, and she almost strangle the man who would have."

She shuddered and concluded: "Amigo, I wish that I was brave, and could use the pistola too, yes!"

The jazz orchestra blared into a fox-trot, and the road resounded to the patter of shoes and slippers. Johnny Powell looked at the Border Nightingale.

"Want to take a chance?"

"With you, senor? Ah, so gladly!" She floated into his arms, and for a few precious moments forgot everything else in the realization of a dream that she had often conjured.

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HITHERTO he had been a distant knight of Mexicana, whose phantom she had summoned to her aid in the name of womanhood. Now she was actually in the shelter of his arms, and he had called her to his side because of sugar lumps that showed a pair of hearts. The wonder of it all was still in her eyes as they returned to their table. As for Johnny—

—he was young, and she was very pretty.

"I have an aunt," she told him shyly. "An aunt who have one time love an Americano. He was an engineer, and verree brave and handsome. But he was killed, and so all her life she Christina was verree sad like me."

Johnny looked incredulous.

"Nay," she told him, "I speak truly. The Romero have once owned all San Rey, but with the revolutions, it go until there was nothing but my voice to keep my father and mother alive. Now they are dead, and Dolores is alone. A little while now, and the Border Nightingale is no more. The name itself means 'Sad One,' senor. May I keep thy lumps of azucar?"

Johnny Powell studied the girl in front of him. Brayfield himself used to say that the man did not live who could stand at Johnny's table for five minutes without having been classified correctly.

"Girl," said Johnny. "I was thinking of riding across the border tomorrow on business. I'd like to bring a little souvenir. Maybe a ring would bring you luck—or is that rushing things?"

The blood flamed into the cheeks of the Border Nightingale. She lowered her eyes.

"Ah, amigo," she said softly—"if thou would bring me a ribbon for my hair?"

"Sure I'll bring you a ribbon," said Johnny. "What color would you like?"

Dolores studied the eyes of Sir Galahad.

"It must be a blue ribbon," she decided. "A most heavenly blue. For look you—it is also the color of the Virgin, who was most pure; and I assure thee, John-nay mio, little Dolores, she has the right to wear the best of the best."

Johnny nodded his head to show that he both believed and knew. "Leave it to me," he told her. "I'm the blue ribbon kid. Feel a little happy now, don't you?"

She nodded dumbly.

"Me, too," said Johnny. "Now I have got back to the job. Nobody bothering you, is there?"

She shook her head. The safety of Johnny Powell had suddenly become very precious to the Border Nightingale.

"In that case," he told her, "I'll have a win a little money for a ranchita with some mango trees." He went away, smiling happily.

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LIFE moves swiftly at Mexicana. An hour later Brayfield's young gamekeeper was imprisoned in the courtyard.

Nine times the house had lost, and there was twenty-two hundred dol-



"HE FOLDED HER A LITTLE CLOSER, AND DREW BACK AGAINST THE WALL. 'SHOOT!'"

lars on the table. The law of averages was yielding to the reckless play of Pancho Gonzales, gunman from the Tres Pinos country. Back of an imperturbable mask, the mind of Johnny Powell analyzed swiftly the last nine throws, and recalled that Gonzales had first rolled the dice clear down the table, and they had been tossed back to him by a fat man with heavy eyes, chewing nervously upon a black cigar.

"Just a minute, amigo," said Johnny Powell. "I feel a little superstitious. Try your luck with these bones, and I'll relieve you of the others."

He reached into the case, and tossed out another pair of dice.

"For Dios, no!" flared the man from Tres Pinos. "I keep the dice by which I went! You think I cheat?"

Thirty men packed around the long table, held their breath.

"I told you I was just superstitious," reminded Johnny. "The house has the right to change the dice at any time. Use that pair, or pick up your money."

Pancho Gonzales drew and fired. The shot went wild. There was a flash of blue from the other side of the table, a spurt of red—and the man from Tres Pinos went down. No one else stirred or spoke.

"All right," sighed Johnny Powell. "Pick up your money, boys, and get out. Don't you move, Morwech—I've got you covered. Everybody else, beat it!"

In a few minutes Brayfield's was cleared of its usual patrons. There remained only Johnny Powell and his

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fellow gamekeepers, the prostrate figure on the floor, and Mike Morwech.

Johnny walked up to the proprietor of the Palace, tore open the latter's coat, and reaching one hand into the left vest pocket, withdrew a pair of dice with the Brayfield housemark. They were apparently identical with the ivory cubes that Pancho Gonzales had been using, but there was this difference: The dice on the table had the usual markings—the tray on the right and the four on the left when the ace was uppermost and the deuce in front, but on the dice taken from Morwech's pocket, this order was reversed, and by that token Johnny knew his own dice. Cold blue eyes looked at Morwech.

"Don't you ever come in here again," warned Johnny. "Don't even walk on the same side of the street—understand? Get out now before I drill you."

Morwech left without saying a word. Johnny Powell surrendered, and even though his employer was away he knew how things were managed, so he slept peacefully on a couch in the commandante's office.

EARLY in the morning Senorita Romero hurried to the courtyard.

Who told you to pot me? Pronto—or I let you have it!"

"The word has got out that you have escape, senor. There is 500 pesos on your head."

The young American digested this information slowly.

"Somebody's pulling trick dice again," he muttered. "If you don't mind, amigo, we'll change horses and outfits and you'll stay here for a while."

Johnny, leaving his captive bound hand and foot, resumed his journey, to all outward appearances a solo scout in the moonlight for an escaped prisoner.

For some reason the commandante at the courtyard had readily granted him twelve hours' leave, and then proclaimed his a jail-breaker. It was the oldest of border tricks—this "killed while trying to escape." But who was using loaded dice? Morwech!

Johnny Powell drew rein. Behind him lay the American border and safety; ahead blinked the lights of Mexicana, where, at 11 o'clock, Don Tostado's baile would open at Mike Morwech's place. He struck off in a brisk canter toward Mexicana.

get your blue ribbon; it'll have some pretty red spots on it."

The Border Nightingale closed her eyes, and her fragile body pulsed from head to foot. In that brief moment she attained crucifixion. When she again looked at Morwech, she was as hard and self-possessed as he.

"Bueno!" she accepted. "All is over. Now I shall play the game at Mexicana too! Senor John-nay Powell goes in safety across the border before morning. You know why?"

"I'll lay you a thousand he don't."

"Then, senor, you lose, because to-night I wrap Don Tostado around my little finger, and in the morning I go with him, and for love of me, he do just what I say! Does he not own the Jefe Politico? Has he not been robbed by you? Bueno! Her voice rose to a shriek. "Harm but one hair on the head of my querido, and the woman who goes away with Don Tostado will make him close up Mexicana, and send you to the wall!"

"No use us trying to cut each other's throats," he grunted. "You take care of Tostado; I'll take care of your friend."

"You—I do not trust," she answered.

his horse, cut across the flank with a rawhide, galloped off over the mesa. Johnny Powell regained his own saddle, wheeled and struck off toward Casa Cruz.

WHERE the white dove walls of Casa Cruz welcome the traveler, Johnny Powell flung himself off a wind-blown horse. In the courtyard a dozen of Don Tostado's soldados sprawled on benches, but he had a drawn revolver in his hand, and they made no move until he had disappeared through the doorway of the casa itself. They closed the heavy gates, and flocked toward the patio.

Johnny Powell was standing in the doorway of the dining room, Juan Cabrillo's revolver trained on a fat cockatoo, and his left hand beckoning to the spellbound Senorita Romero. Dolores shrieked a warning, but was too late. Behind the young American, Jose Garcia, proprietor of the Casa Cruz, appeared suddenly with a heavy wine bottle. He brought it down with compelling force on the head of Johnny Powell, and Johnny crumpled up.

When he came to himself, Dolores was kneeling by his side in the courtyard, and they were surrounded by a wall of Tostado's men.

"Querido mio," whispered a voice. "I had so hoped to save thee. You should have gone. But, ah, beloved, I understand!"

He nodded dully, and struggled to his feet, swaying like a drunken man.

He put a protecting arm around the Border Nightingale and steadied himself. In front of them stood Senor Tostado, holding in his fat hands a blue hair ribbon and two notes that had been taken from the captive's pocket. The senor's dark eyes were angled with red. A cockatoo does not like to have his crest sheared away.

"So," he hissed, "it is the gringo that I already save from being shot, who would interfere some more, eh? And you, senorita—you think that I am old and ugly and such a monster, eh? You try to make the fool of Don Tostado—no? I show you a little joke, too! With your backs against the wall—both! Vamonos!"

Johnny Powell's head cleared instantly, but his face went linen white.

"Hold on," he pleaded. "She's not in on this. Smeat me all over the place if you want. But you let this little girl go. You're a good fellow, hombre—you're a big sport, see? You wouldn't shoot a baby just because she did a little kiddin'. She didn't mean—"

Dolores put a small hand over his eyes. "I don't want to see the face of a man who has lied to me."

"Hush, beloved! Did I not tell thee there was poison in my bosom. Querido, we die together; otherwise, we but die apart."

She turned to Tostado. "Senor, may I but have the ribbon that is so blue? You will not refuse a last request?"

"Ho-ho—let your lover tie the ribbon in your hair, and then say good-bye with one little kiss—so! It will be a good play in the theater. Two minutes, I ring down the curtain—Amigos, to your guns!"

The little Border Nightingale turned to Johnny Powell. Her hands pressed into his the satin symbol of their fragile romance. They are brave little creatures, these Mexicana moths! "Look you," she exclaimed, "where the braid begins. John-nay mio! Give no thought to him. . . . We are this!"

"Senor Powell:—"

"I return thy ribbon that thou mayst understand there is nothing any longer between us. Senor Tostado, who is very rich and honorable, is to take me away, and this morning I go with him joyfully. Because of his goodness of heart, he has interceded in thy behalf, but thou art to cross to thine own country at once and never return."

"I who am most proud and happy advise thee to think no more of 'DOLORES ROMERO'!"

Johnny fingered the satin bow, and his sensitive fingers, trained to detect the slightest irregularity in an ivory cube, felt the crinkle of paper under the center knot of the ribbon. He snuffed the bow carefully into his coat pocket.

"Make a nice little souvenir," he said to the secretary. "Tiene cigarillo?"

The secretary proffered cigarette and shrugged apologetically. "His excellency would prefer that you not return to the hotel, and so I have myself to collect your money at Senor Brayfield's. It is over here, on the right side of the road, and there you may cross."

"You're some little master of ceremonies," Johnny acknowledged. "Lead on!"

Twenty feet past a jutting rock that hid them from view of the courtyard on the hill, Johnny Powell leaned forward in the saddle, and his right fist caught Juan Cabrillo just behind the ear. The secretary, to his excellent slumped off sideways, and sprawled face downward in the dust. Forth from Johnny Powell's pocket came his lady's ribbon. Under the knot was a second note. His eyes deciphered the lines written hurriedly in pencil:

"Querido Mio:—"